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ABSTRACT

A study was designed to ascertain the effect writing centers and peer tutoring have on the attitudes of student writers. Subjects, 121 students enrolled in either basic writing or English composition courses at Davis and Elkins College, had their attitudes toward writing measured. Over the semester the attitudes, of both those that did (43) and did not (78) visit the writing center, were recorded and compared. In addition, the attitudes of students who received peer feedback in class were considered. Results indicated that although the attitudes of all students engaged in writing improved, those who visited the writing center showed the greatest gains in positive attitude. Findings suggest that writing centers are performing a valuable service by contributing to the improved attitudes of student writers. Also, as more process-oriented teachers begin to use peer review in their freshman writing courses, writing centers must adjust to serve a growing community of writers outside English department composition courses. (Four tables of data are included, and eight references are appended.) (MS)

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Improving Students' Writing Attitudes: The Effects of the Writing Center

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Improving Students' Writing Attitudes:

The Effects of the Writing Center

Writing center advocates are convinced of the benefits of writing centers and of tutoring. However, little research has been done which clearly demonstrates these benefits. This study was designed to ascertain the effect writing centers and peer tutoring have on the attitudes of student writers.

Writing centers' influence on writers' attitudes is important because students with lower apprehension have been shown to write more fluently, producing more words, sentences, and paragraphs (Book), and to perform better in spelling, punctuation, modifcation, fragment recognition, and diction (Daly, "Writing Apprehension"). In addition, Daly ("The Effects") and Garcia have shown the writing of high apprehensives to be of lower overall quality.1

The writing process is equally affected by an apprehensive attitude. Selfe, for example, found that high apprehensives engaged in little written pre-work, did less planning, and did little editing and revising. Low apprehensives also elongated planning time (Bannister).

1 For a complete discussion of the relationship between writer apprehension and writing characteristics, see Daly, "Writing Apprehension."

Current research, therefore, indicates that students' attitudes and apprehension affect the fluency, linguistic maturity, and quality of their writing. Are writing centers and peer tutoring having a beneficial effect on the attitudes of student writers?

Method and Design

Changes in student writers' attitudes over the semester were recorded. The changes in attitudes of students who did and did not visit the writing center were then compared. In addition, the attitudes of students who received peer feedback in class were considered.

Data were collected at Davis and Elkins College during the fall semester, 1986. Students in all first-year writing courses--two sections of basic writing and six sections of English composition, one designated an honors section--were given Reigstad and McAndrew's "Writing Attitude Scale." The scale includes twenty statements which the student responds to on a Lichert-type system. Scoring the positive and negative statements produces a numerical representation of the student's attitude. Scores range from negative 40 to positive 40, higher scores representing better attitudes, zero representing a neutral attitude.

Controlled selection of participants was not necessary since all students were given the survey. The students

completed the scale immediately at the beginning of the first class meeting in order to achieve an accurate rendition of their attitudes, limiting the amount of teacher interaction before the scoring. Students were again administered the scale during the last class meeting of the semester, but one section of English composition was not included in the exit scores when the instructor refused to cooperate. A total of 121 students, 23 from basic writing and 98 from composition, took both the entrance and the exit surveys.

Results

The results of the attitude survey are given in the table below. Sections 1 and 6 were basic writing. Section 4 was an honors section of composition. Sections 5 and 6 were taught by the same person, but all other sections were taught by different instructors.

Table 1: All Students

	N=	Sept. Mean	Dec. Mean	percent increase	number improving	percent improving
Section 1	14	8.14	8.79	8	7	50
Section 2	25	8.08	11.21	39	15	60
Section 3	18	9.01	13.39	49	13	72
Section 4	11	9.73	18.18	87	8	73
Section 5	23	5.35	11.57	116	15	65
Section 6	9	4.33	11.22	159	6	67
Section 7	21	2.05	12.43	506	18	85
Totals	121	6.53	11.55	177	82	68

The "N=" column shows the number of students in each section. The "September Mean" column indicates the mean entrance attitude scores of the students, the "December Mean" column the exit scores. The "Percent Increase" column indicates the percentage of change between the two scores. The last two columns indicate the number of students who improved their attitudes and what percentage of the whole the improving students represented.

Section 1 was taught using workbooks and lecture instruction, paragraph writings graded individually. Section 2 used a samples reader for class discussion and also graded individual compositions seperately. Section 3 tried to promote student thought during in-class exercises yet focused on surface errors as grading criteria. Section 4, the honors section, was taught as an introduction to English literature course. Section 5 was a writing workshop where class time was devoted to conferencing and writing. Sections 6 and 7 depended on peer review and portfolio grading to evaluate the writing.

Tables 2 and 3 seperate those students who did not visit the writing center from those who did, showing information which compares to that in table 1.

Table 2: Non Writing Center Students

	N=	Sept. Mean	Dec. Mean	percent increase	number improving	percent improving
Section 1	8	11.25	8.75	-22	3	38
Section 2	23	8.91	11.30	27	13	57
Section 3	14	9.43	14.35	52	10	71

Section 4	11	9.73	18.18	87	8	73
Section 5	1	8.00	15.00	87	1	100
Section 6	1	1.00	22.00	2100	1	100
Section 7	20	2.20	12.30	454	17	85
Totals	78	7.52	13.10	74	53	68

Table 3: Writing Center Students

	N=	Sept. Mean	Dec. Mean	percent increase	number improving	percent improving
Section 1	6	4.00	8.83	121	4	67
Section 2	2	-1.50	10.00	766	2	100
Section 3	4	7.00	8.00	14	3	75
Section 4	0					
Section 5	22	5.23	11.41	118	14	64
Section 6	8	4.75	9.88	109	5	63
Section 7	1	-1.00	15.00	1600	1	100
Totals	43	4.67	10.46	124	29	67

Table 4 indicates the relationships between those students who received peer assistance in the writing center or the writing classroom and those students who received no peer assistance. In table 4 students from sections 6 and 7 are combined with students from other sections who used the writing center to produce the peer helped figures.

Table 4: Peer Helped vs. Not Peer Helped Students

	N=	Sept. Mean	Dec. Mean	percent increase	number improving	percent improving
helped	64	4.44	12.47	181	47	73
not helped	57	7.51	9.84	31	27	47

Discussion

Several observations become immediately evident. First, the mean scores for all students increased, regardless of

section, method of instruction, or writing center attendance. This tends to indicate that the act of writing for a reader, even if that reader is only the teacher, tends to improve attitudes. Practice alone apparently positively influences attitude.

Second, the overall improvement scores for all students (table 1), for non-writing center students (table 2), and for writing center students (table 3) all indicate that approximately two-thirds of the students will have improved attitudes at the end of a class. Method of instruction and writing center attendance do not apparently influence the rate of improvement.

Third, the most significant difference between writing center and non-writing center students is indicated by the amount of attitude improvement recorded. Students who did not visit the writing center improved their attitude scores by an average of 74 percent, but students who did visit the writing center improved scores by 124 percent. This would indicate that, while writing centers don't improve the attitudes of any more students than would otherwise be improved, writing centers do make for greater changes in the writers' attitudes.

Table 4, however, offers the largest improvement discrepancies. Forty-seven percent of those students who did not receive peer assistance improved in attitude by an average of 31 percent. In sharp contrast, 73 percent of those who did receive peer assistance, either in the writing center or in

peer response groups in the classroom, improved in attitude by an average of 181 percent.

Conclusion

The figures indicate that writing centers do have a positive effect on the attitudes of students who visit the facilities. This changing of attitude alone should justify the continued existence of writing centers. And if, as previous research has demonstrated, there is a relationship between writers' attitudes and the quality of their writing, then writing centers can be seen to have a significant, beneficial effect on both writers and writing.

The figures also indicate that it is not the writing center itself which positively affects attitude as much as it is peer response. If all writing courses employed peer response in their design, writing centers might be phased out for students enrolled in those courses. This does not mean, of course, that writing centers would no longer be needed; their services could be re-directed to continue to assist students preparing writing assignments for courses other than freshman composition.

The study seems to support two conclusions. First, writing centers are performing a valuable service by contributing to the improved attitudes of student writers. Second, as more process-oriented teachers begin to use peer review in their freshman writing courses, writing centers must

adjust to increasingly serve a community of writers outside English department composition courses.

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